Amazingly, most high school curricula make no mention of the Dutch Republic of the 16th and 17th century. Given the remarkable achievements of the Dutch during this period, it is difficult to understand this omission. A very small country, surrounded by powerful European monarchies, was able to create a government, in many respects an independent republic, unlike any of the time, which lasted from approximately 1588 until the 1780s. The United Provinces, as it was initially called, came into existence more than one hundred years prior to the republic with which we are most familiar, the United States. According to Jonathan Israel, many foreigners thought that the United Provinces allowed too much social, intellectual and religious liberty. The Dutch had discovered that compromise in these areas was essential if they were to succeed economically. In other words, the freedoms most Dutch citizens were allowed were based on economic necessity. No revolution of the masses occurred, the republic developed naturally from existing organizations into a confederacy of city-states. The Republic of the United Provinces was founded on a variety of economic, ideological, religious, or military reasons.

In order to better understand how the political institutions of this new republic were formed, a brief history of the major events of the 16th century that contributed to the creation of the Dutch Republic follows. The information contained in this essay is not original research. It is based primarily on Jonathan Israel’s *The Dutch Republic: Its Rise, Greatness, and Fall, 1477-1806*, George Edmundson’s *History of Holland*, and William Temple’s *Observations Upon the United Provinces of the Netherlands.*
A combination of external circumstances and internal changes were necessary in the formation of the republic. Early in the 16th century, the United Provinces did not exist as an independent entity. It was part of the area known as the Low Countries (see Appendix 1). The Low Countries was comprised of the Netherlands, Belgium, Luxembourg, and parts of Germany and France. These areas were under the control of the Holy Roman Emperor Charles V and then by his son Philip II of Spain. As a staunch Roman Catholic, Philip II was unwilling to allow the continued development of Dutch Protestantism. The first step in the revolt began in 1566 when a group of young Protestant nobles presented their Petition of Compromise to the governor of the Netherlands Margaret of Parma. The petition, ostensibly against the Catholic Inquisition, did not criticize the King of Spain or the Catholic Church. With the capitulation of Margaret on this issue an upsurge in Protestant protests occurred culminating in the iconoclastic fury (destruction of Catholic religious objects). Philip responded by sending troops to quell the uprising and a period of extreme repression of the provinces ensued. Under the leadership of Prince William I of Orange, Count of Nassau (William the Silent), the Dutch Revolt began in 1568, initiating the Eighty Years’ War with Spain. The primary focus had shifted from religious conflict to a military action. In 1579 in order to more effectively continue resistance to Spain the seven northern provinces of Holland, Zeeland, Utrecht, Gelderland, Groningen, Friesland, and Overijssel formed a defensive political alliance called the Union of Utrecht.

The Union of Utrecht became the foundation for the new state of the United Provinces of the Netherlands (Dutch Republic) (see Appendix 1). Since part of the reason for the rebellion was resistance to Spain’s attempts of centralization of authority, the new union was intended as a confederacy of states. “The Union of Utrecht had envisaged a league of several (not necessarily seven) sovereign ‘provinces’ which agreed to give up their sovereign rights in a few limited areas, chiefly defence, taxation for defence, and foreign policy” (Israel, p.
This union led by the States General declared its independence from Philip II with the Act of Abjuration in 1581. During the last decade of the 17th century the Dutch Republic attained military, naval, and commercial supremacy. Their success was not only a result of the institutional framework created under the Union of Utrecht; it was also due in part to the decisions of Elizabeth I and Philip II. These monarchs diverted their militaries from the Netherlands to other areas which allowed the Dutch Republic to apply all their resources to strengthening their position.

The Union of Utrecht required that provinces support each other in the event of war. At the same time it very clearly outlines the rights of each province to choose their own government. “Each province and the individual cities, members, and inhabitants thereof shall each retain undiminished its special and particular privileges, franchises, exemptions, rights, statutes, laudable and long practice customs, usages and all its rights …” (Rowen, p. 70).

The Union of Utrecht also required that the decisions of the States General and the Provinces be unanimous. However, this rule was hardly ever exercised in the ensuing years. Decisions were most often made by majority vote, with Holland, because of its large population and economic superiority, often exerting the most influence. After 1590, federal authority was extended beyond the initial terms of the Union of Utrecht. The States-General also made decisions in the areas of shipping regulations, territorial administration, and religion. Although the United Provinces were set up as a confederacy, many decisions were made in the manner of a federalist state.

As the Union of Utrecht indicates, the base of power of the United Provinces was derived from the city. Because the Netherlands was highly urbanized and economically successful, a large middle class, whose primary political allegiance was to their city, developed unfettered by a powerful monarchy, aristocracy, or peasantry. The concept of nationalism had not yet developed. Citizens were used to making decisions at this level and
were unwilling to allow a strong central governing body to usurp this control. Most urban improvements, social welfare, and health care were accomplished at the local level. While social hierarchies obviously existed in Dutch towns, the large urban population diluted much of the effects of stratification that occurred where a large landed aristocracy existed. Although at times the various political units of the Dutch Republic were in conflict and decisions often took much time, towns and provinces exercised a great deal of autonomy in governing. “The Revolt made Dutch provincial government stronger, and more efficient, but only because the provinces were now the organs of a partially federal state which required greater collaboration, and heavier taxation, than could be conceived of before 1572” (Israel, p. 291).

The United Provinces of the Netherlands was a confederation of seven provinces in which each province operated its own independent government. The federal government was called the Generality (States General). Under the States General were a variety of administrative bodies, such as the Council of States (*Raad van State*) and the Admiralty Colleges. Each province was governed by the Provincial States and the main executive official was a stadholder (*stadhouder* in Dutch). The primary administrative body of the Provincial States was the Commissioned Councilors (*Geocommitteerde Raden*). The Land’s Advocate / Council Pensionary was an important position in the States General and the Provincial States. “In order, therefore, to understand the course of events in the republic, which had been correctly recognised by the treaty *Twelve Years’ Truce, 1609-1621* not as a single state, but as a group of "free and independent States," it is necessary to give a brief account of one of the most strangely complicated systems of government that the world has ever seen—especially strange because no one could ever say positively where or with whom the sovereignty really resided” (Edmundson, Ch.7, Paragraph 1). The remaining portion of
this essay will attempt to explain how each of these legislative bodies functioned. See Appendix 2.

Although Holland, due to its population and wealth, was able to exert more influence in the States General than the other six provinces, each province was an active participant in the governing of the republic. Each province was entitled to one vote regardless of how many delegates they sent to the States General. Order of speaking and voting followed a ranking system based on the individual provinces. Gelderland, as the only duchy, voted first, and then Holland, Zeeland, Utrecht, Friesland, Overijssel, and Groningen. The States General as originally envisioned as a mechanism for determining foreign policy especially as it related to its military and navy; however, “after 1590, the federal principle was extended to areas such as regulation of shipping, administration of conquered districts, church affairs, and promotion of colonial affairs” (Israel, pp.276-7). This body also appointed ambassadors and other important officials.

The Council of State was an executive body of the States General. Prior to 1588, the Council of State had been the primary governing agent in the United Provinces. After this time, it became the primary administrative body of the State General. As such, it administered the military and garrisons. One of the chief roles of the States General was to administer the Generality Lands (originally States Flanders, States Brabant, Maastricht and the Overmaas). Another duty was to levy quotas from the provinces in support of the military. The military budget was prepared by this body and presented to the States General. The Council of State also functioned as a court of justice with appellate jurisdiction in military and financial matters. The provinces were represented by twelve councilors (three for Holland, two each for Friesland, Zeeland, and Gelderland, and one each for the other three). The stadholders were ex officio members.
“Finally, there were the admiralty colleges, one of the principal administrative arms of the Generality. These colleges were responsible for administering the navy, collecting customs, maintaining guard boats on rivers and estuaries, building warships, recruiting naval seamen, and enforcing (and advising on) the States General's regulation of shipping and fisheries” (Israel, p. 295). These colleges were located in Amsterdam, Rotterdam (South Holland), Hoorn and Enkhuizen (the North Quarter), Middelburg (Zeeland), and Dokkum (Friesland). Holland and Zeeland provided the naval fleets which protected the republic. Although each admiralty college acted independently in appointments of officers and seamen recruitment, the Lieutenant-Admiral and Vice-Admirals of Holland and Zeeland were selected by the Provincial States. Stadholders were admirals of Holland and Zeeland. The Commander-in-Chief was appointed by the States General.

Although the States General was at the center of the Dutch government, the Provincial States exercised a large degree of sovereignty which, in turn, was limited by the autonomy of the towns and regions. The Provincial States were composed of representatives from towns and nobility. These representatives were from wealthy families and not representative of the general population. The regents and burgurers of the towns were selected, along with the stadholder, by this small oligarchy in the Provincial States. For example, in Holland the nobles had one vote and each of eighteen towns had one vote. The nobles represented the rural districts and small towns and were able to vote first. The larger, wealthier towns, such as Amsterdam, could often override the majority.

The Commissioned Councilors (Gecommitteerde-Raden) was to the Provincial States as the Council of State was to the States General. It functioned as the Provincial Estates administrative organization. This body sat continually and consisted of representatives appointed directly by the nobles and towns not the Provincial States. Its primary duty was to publish and enforce the regulations and laws of the Provincial Estates. It also controlled the
finances and met all the military requirements. It had the power to call meetings of the Provincial Estates.

In theory the government of the United Provinces was a confederacy of seven states each with its own sovereignty. As previously indicated, in reality some provinces and states had more power and influence. This loose federation had at its head a monarch-like position called the stadholder (see Appendix 3). The power wielded by this position often depended on the ability of the individual. For example, William the Silent, was perceived by many as the head of the State and as such should control the foreign policy and administration of the republic. He was the executive officer in the Provincial States. While in theory the stadholders were freely appointed and subordinate to the Provincial States and the States General, they were often able to exert enormous influence. While not an official member of either institution, he could address them whenever he chose. In Holland, the most powerful state, he administered justice, appointed many of the local regents and burghers, and was responsible for the defense of the province. The regents and burghers were responsible for selecting representatives to the Provincial Estates.

The Advocate of Holland was the legal adviser to the States of Holland. He presided over and conducted the business of the States General and the Commissioned Councilors. He was the leader and spokesman of the Holland deputies in the States General. He kept the minutes, introduced business, and counted the votes at the Provincial States meetings. Dutch and foreign ambassadors corresponded and negotiated with the Advocate. Over time the Advocate gained control over almost every administrative department. At times the Advocate and Stadholder competed for power. After Oldenbarnevelt’s overthrow and death, the office became known as the Pensionary of Holland. The office was now held for five years instead of for life. The Stadholder’s goal was to ensure that a strong leader never elected to this position so he could protect his role as leader of the Republic. This
arrangement was maintained until Johan de Witt became Pensionary of Holland during the first Stadholderless period.

The Dutch Republic was not truly a republic. The seven provinces were a loose confederation with the States of Holland exerting a tremendous amount of influence. The princes of Orange in their role as Stadholders, in many respects, functioned as monarchs. The political institutions evolved as a mechanism for protecting the rights and privileges of the nobles, regents, burghers, and businesses. The Dutch Republic was certainly not a representative government unless you were in the groups just mentioned. The States General had little authority over the provinces. In fact, the provinces had sovereign authority over themselves. Power in the Dutch Republic came from the bottom up. Obviously, the Dutch government was able to function well enough to become a world power for most the seventeenth century and govern successfully for two hundred years. This oligarchy created a wealthy country with many social programs. Despite its flaws it successfully governed for about two hundred years with institutions that had no precedence in Europe.
Appendix 1
Maps

Map 1  Europe about 1560
Perry-Castañeda Library Map Collection
The University of Texas at Austin
<http://www.lib.utexas.edu/maps/>

Map 2  The Netherlands 1509-1609
Perry-Castañeda Library Map Collection
The University of Texas at Austin
<http://www.lib.utexas.edu/maps/>

Map 3  The Low Countries, 1556-1648
Joaquín de Salas Vara de Rey
Marina Bay A34
Estepona
29680 Malaga (Spain)
<http://www.terra.es/personal7/jqvaraderey/lowcount.htm>

Map 4  Europe 1648
Perry-Castañeda Library Map Collection
The University of Texas at Austin
<http://www.lib.utexas.edu/maps/>
Appendix 2
Republic of the United Provinces of the Netherlands, 1572-1672

Government Structure

Pensionary
↓
States General (States of Holland)

Council of State

Stadholder
↓
Provincial Estates

Commissioned Councillors

Admiralty Colleges

Regents - Burghers
↓
Towns
## Appendix 3

**TABLE 9. The Stadholders of Holland, Zeeland, and Utrecht and (from 1590) Gelderland and Overijssel** (Israel, p. 302)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>States Stadholder</th>
<th>Dates</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>William I, Prince of Orange</td>
<td>1572-84</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Maurits, Count of Nassau</td>
<td>1585-1625 (Utrecht from 1590)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Frederik Hendrik, Prince of Orange</td>
<td>1625-47</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>William II, Prince of Orange</td>
<td>1647-50</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>William III, Prince of Orange</td>
<td>1672-1702</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>William IV, Prince of Orange</td>
<td>1747-51 (Gelderland from 1729)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>William V, Prince Orange</td>
<td>1751-95</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**TABLE 24. The Advocates and Pensionaries of the States of Holland, 1513–1795** (Israel, p. 455)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Pensionary</th>
<th>Native town</th>
<th>Previous office</th>
<th>Term</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>(before 1618 'Advocate')</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Albrecht van Loo</td>
<td>—</td>
<td>jurist of the Hof</td>
<td>1513–24</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Aert van der Goes</td>
<td>Delft?</td>
<td>jurist of the Hof</td>
<td>1524–43</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Adriaen van der Goes Delft</td>
<td>Delft</td>
<td>jurist of the Hof</td>
<td>1543–60</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jacob van den Eynde Delft</td>
<td>Delft</td>
<td>pensionary of Delft</td>
<td>1560–8a</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Paulus Buys</td>
<td>Amersfoort</td>
<td>pensionary of Leiden</td>
<td>1572–85</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Johan van Oldenbarnevelt</td>
<td>Amersfoort</td>
<td>pensionary of Rotterdam</td>
<td>1586–1618</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Andries de Witt</td>
<td>Dordrecht</td>
<td>pensionary of Dordrecht</td>
<td>1618–21</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Anthonis Duyck</td>
<td>Hoorn</td>
<td>griffer of Hof of Holland</td>
<td>1621–9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jacob Cats</td>
<td>Brouwershaven</td>
<td>pensionary of Dordrecht</td>
<td>1629–31</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Adriaen Pauw</td>
<td>Amsterdam</td>
<td>pensionary of Amsterdam</td>
<td>1631–6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jacob Cats</td>
<td>Brouwershaven</td>
<td>pensionary of Dordrecht</td>
<td>1636–52</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Adriaen Pauw</td>
<td>Amsterdam</td>
<td>official of SH</td>
<td>1652–3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Johan de Witt</td>
<td>Dordrecht</td>
<td>pensionary of Dordrecht</td>
<td>1653–72</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gaspar Fagel</td>
<td>Haarlem</td>
<td>griffer of States General</td>
<td>1672–88</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Michael ten Hove</td>
<td>—</td>
<td>pensionary of Haarlem</td>
<td>1688–9</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Annotated Bibliography


Participated in the Brampton Lectures at Oxford University in 1913. Presented *Church in Rome in the 1st Century*.


Sir William Temple, 1628–99, English diplomat and author. He was married in 1655 to Dorothy Osborne. They settled in Ireland, and in 1661 Temple entered the Irish parliament. He moved (1663) to England, served on various diplomatic missions, and was made a baronet (1666). In 1668 he negotiated with great skill and speed a triple alliance with the Netherlands and Sweden to check the power of France. He became (1668) ambassador to The Hague but was secretly recalled (1670) after Charles II had concluded the secret Treaty of Dover with Louis XIV. He was reappointed (1674) at the conclusion of the unpopular English-Dutch war and negotiated the marriage (1677) of William of Orange to Princess Mary of England. Temple several times refused to become secretary of state, but he did promote reorganization (1679) of the privy council. After this proved a failure, he retired (1681) to his estate, Moor Park, in Surrey, and devoted his time to writing. He produced a number of political works (*Observations upon the United Provinces*, and *Essay on the Original and Nature of Government*) and essays. Jonathan Swift, who was Temple's secretary for various periods in the 1690s, helped prepare his letters (1700–1703) and memoirs for publication (parts of both had earlier unauthorized publication). Temple's essay, *Of Ancient and Modern Learning* (1690), precipitated the famous “ancients versus moderns” controversy, which caused Swift to write *The Battle of the Books* (1697). Temple's style in his personal essays was long considered a model of balanced and polished prose. Temple died in Moor Park, Surrey, England in 1699.